

## História e Consciência de Classe de György Lukács *no contexto da ditadura proletária de 1919\**

Gábor Gálgó\*\*

### Resumo:

Este artigo tem como objetivo fazer uma leitura de análise contextual mostrando que os ataques contra a posição social-democrata em *História e Consciência de Classe* (e no *Lenin* de 1924) não critica exclusivamente o que foi rotulado durante os debates posteriores como uma posição “centrista”, mas muito muitas vezes remete para posições realmente adotadas pelos líderes social-democratas no Estado proletário 1919.

### Palavras-chave:

*História e Consciência de Classe*; Lukács; Comuna Húngara.

## György Lukács's History and Class Consciousness *in the Context of the 1919 Hungarian Proletarian Dictatorship*

### Abstract:

This article aims to make a reading contextual analysis will show that the attacks against Social Democratic position in *History and Class Consciousness* (and in the 1924 *Lenin*) criticizes not exclusively that one that was labelled during the later debates as a “centrist” position but very often refers back to stances actually adopted by Social Democratic leaders in the 1919 proletarian rule.

### Key words:

*History and Class Consciousness*; Lukács; Hungarian Commune.

---

\* This text is based on my forthcoming book on the *1918-1919 Hungarian revolutions* [N.T.: *As Revoluções Húngaras*. Coleção Revoluções do Século XX. Direção de Emília Viotti da Costa. São Paulo: Ed. Unesp, 2014]. Revisão de Daniel Fernandez.

\*\* Doutor em letras e em filosofia pela Universidade de Budapeste. Pesquisador da Academia de Ciências da Hungria.

Though the links that György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* attached to the 133-day long Hungarian proletarian revolution from 21 March to 1 August, 1919, had been at a considerable extent reconstructed in the scholarship, those analyses situated the text mostly in the context of other retrospective works<sup>1</sup>. The present study, however, intends to approach the work in the very context of the Hungarian proletarian dictatorship by pointing out to those elements which reflect to the events Lukács as a people's commissar of culture and education as well as the chief ideologue of Béla Kun's regime took part in.

The present close reading and contextual analysis will show that the attacks against Social Democratic position in *History and Class Consciousness* (and in the 1924 *Lenin*) criticizes not exclusively that one that was labelled during the later debates as a "centrist" position but very often refers back to stances actually adopted by Social Democratic leaders in the 1919 proletarian rule.

As to the most explicit statements, the author of *History and Class Consciousness* reminded the reader that the empirical material on which these theoretical writings were based had been gathered during the 1919 Soviet Republic: "Thus in the essay on *The Changing Function of Historical Materialism* we can still hear the echoes of those exaggeratedly sanguine hopes that many of us cherished concerning the duration and tempo of the revolution" (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. XLI).

Lukács, with references to his Hungarian communist fellow-philosophers (József Révai and Béla Fogarasi) and with an enlarged re-publication of his inaugural speech of the Marx-Engels Institute in Budapest in July 1919 (to which the above quote refers) highlighted these links.

The theoretical goal of the book is to justify the righteousness of the revolutionary praxis of the orthodox – or Communist – Marxism, opposed to Social Democratic opportunism, by the methodology of Marxism as a total view of history. Lukács's theory has two main pillars. The first is the distinction between "real" and "psychological" class consciousness. The second is the endowment of this "real" consciousness – or, as regarded historically: this process of consciousness – with a reality better founded than empirical reality. The conclusion of the book links epistemological optimism to ontological hope: "every step in the direction of true knowledge is at the same time a step towards converting that knowledge into practical reality" (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 339).

On the basis of revolutionary experience, the first chapters offer the critique of the "psychological" consciousness of the proletariat. The following theoretical chapters show how Marxism as a method leads to philosophical class consciousness which is the very product of capitalism. Failed revolutions are also crucial steps in the development of real class consciousness since they make further struggles and, more importantly, the long work of disenchantment of psychological consciousness impossible; they open the way, however, before the development of real class consciousness. Alienation, a key concept of the Marxist description of capitalism, becomes class consciousness only in the proletariat. In other words, Lukács's intention is to protect Marxism as a method in social sciences on the basis of which the historical role of the proletariat, including its role as a bearer of the process of consciousness of historical dialectics, can be underpinned. A critical overview of the history of philosophy offered by Lukács proves that from the standpoint of Kant and his followers this role of the proletariat cannot be endorsed since the very notion of alienation is the production of a later period.

Concerning the genesis of class consciousness, Lukács held the view that the progress of the circulation of commodities and the reification of the social processes inevitably leads to the formation of the proletariat to a conscious class.

Revolutions in their process possess more truth than in their factuality: as Lukács wrote, "the *developing tendencies of history constitute a higher reality than the empirical facts*" (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 181). The acceptance of this consciousness process as real existence would offer an "ontological" proof of the reality of the role the proletariat necessarily plays in history. These arguments are accompanied by a third thesis on the importance of "the *practical class consciousness*" because all speculation about the historical role of the proletariat must, without praxis, remain a mere "conceptual mythology" (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 205).

The Social Democrats' inability to change their perspective originates in their way of thinking; they give priority to facts and not to processes:

This disintegration of a dialectical, practical unity into an inorganic aggregate of the empirical and the utopian, a clinging to the 'facts' (in their untranscended immediacy) and a faith in illusions as alien to the past as to the present is characteristic in increasing measure of the development of social democracy. (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 196)

---

1 Mesterházi, Miklós. A messianizmus történetfilozófusa – Lukács György munkássága a húszas években [A Philosopher of History of Messianism – György Lukács in the 1920s]. Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Intézet – Lukács Archívum, 1987, 94-103.; Krausz, T. – M. Mesterházi. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* in the Debates of the 1920s. In: *Hungarian Studies on György Lukács*. Vol I. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1993, pp. 139-166.

The Social Democratic stance, according to Lukács, is an amalgam of “economic fatalism and ethical utopianism” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 196). As a consequence, “the proletariat will be drawn on to the territory of the bourgeoisie and naturally the bourgeoisie will maintain its superiority” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 196). Seen from this rigid point of view, Lukács's Social Democratic counterpart at the People's Commissariat of Culture and Education, Zsigmond Kunfi's “humanism” in 1919 proves to be nothing but the confirmation of this basically bourgeois attitude. The bourgeoisie had to turn a deaf ear to the teaching of historical materialism since becoming conscious of this theory would have undermined the existence of the whole class. Hence, Lukács triumphantly states that “in his view the experiences of the years of revolution have provided a magnificent confirmation of all the essential aspects of orthodox (i.e. Communist) Marxism” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. XLIII).

Orthodox Marxism is first and foremost anti-Social-Democratism: this verdict is the genuine and proper heritage of the 1919 experiment in Lukács's eyes. The opportunists “erase revolutionary dialectics from Marxism, so as to provide an intellectual immortalisation of bourgeois society” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 26). In opposition to it, “the task of orthodox Marxism” would consist in “its victory over Revisionism and utopianism” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 24) – and over putschism as well. In Lukács's opinion, a coup in Blanqui's style can never be properly timed not because of the unsatisfactory conditions but because coups are inherently “too early,” in opposition to the revolution.

Thus, the orthodox Marxist method can only be reached from the conscious standpoint of the proletariat. Accordingly, in Lukács's eyes the contribution of positive sciences to the transformation of societies are only of secondary importance. By this option, Lukács left behind the position the Communists, drawing on Béla Fogarasi's works, held in 1919 during the debates on the transformation of the outdated curricula in the lyceum based on the teaching of classical languages. The idea was to push the sociological, natural and technical sciences as well as economics to the forefront, and to build on the base of this practical knowledge an adequate philosophical system. In Fogarasi's view, the philosophical foundation of these sciences, as well as the philosophical integration of their outcomes, are necessary to keep the critical attitude alive, to prevent the simple replacement of a stubborn nationalistic ideology with a not less dogmatic Marxism. Moreover, they expected this overall philosophical framework to transmit moral knowledge, substituting thereby the traditional moral education.

Marxism as a non-positive science (in opposition to Fogarasi's point of view) was on the one hand the hallmark of Lukács's new conception in *History and Class Consciousness*, while on the other it engendered his “total” concept of Marxism. As he writes, “In the last analysis Marxism does not acknowledge the existence of independent sciences of law, economics or history etc.: there is nothing but a single, unified – dialectical and historical – science of the evolution of society as a totality” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 28).

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács abandoned the messianic conception of ethics and professed instead the opinion the regime's leader Béla Kun held in 1919. As Lukács wrote, “[c]lass consciousness is the ‘ethics’ of the proletariat” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 42). Kun, in his propagandistic brochures of early 1919, had defined Communism as anti-Social-Democratism: he described it as the content that was thrown out of the Social Democratic boat “floating on the waters of accommodation and opportunism:”<sup>2</sup> revolutionary Marxism, that is, “a scientific politics based on economic and social laws for the liberation of the proletariat” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 42). Differently from the humanist people's commissar of culture, Zsigmond Kunfi, Kun did not believe in an overall, “inter-class” morality. As he said: “The capitalism has its own class morality that has to be opposed with the proletariat's own morality. Let Comrade Kunfi call it Machiavellism, I say that *I know only that morality which corresponds to the proletariat's class interests*”<sup>3</sup>.

But concerning the majority of the social and political dilemmas of the revolution, Lukács remained faithful to his 1919 position. He regarded the peasantry in *History and Class Consciousness* as a non-pure, “sterile” class:

Bourgeoisie and proletariat are the only pure classes in bourgeois society. They are the only classes whose existence and development are entirely dependent on the course taken by the modern evolution of production and only from the vantage point of these classes can a plan for the total organisation of society *even be imagined*. The outlook of the other classes (petty bourgeois or peasants) is ambiguous or sterile because their existence is not based exclusively on their role in the capitalist system of production but is indissolubly linked with the vestiges of feudal society. (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 59)

In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács likened the fate of the proletariat and that of the revolution to the fate of “mankind.” It was the Marxist revolution impelling Hungary to the mainstream of world history which

---

2 Kun, Béla. “Lenin.” *Válogatott cikkek és beszédek [Selected Articles and Speeches]*. Ed. Éva Moharos. Budapest: Kossuth, 1985, pp. 92-99; 98.

3 Qtd in Lukács, György. *Forradalomban. Cikkek, tanulmányok 1918-1919. [In Revolution. Articles, essays 1918-1919.]* Eds Miklós Mesterházi and Ferenc L. Lendvai. Budapest: Magvető, 1987, p. 509, editorial note.

rendered this viewpoint accessible. For the defeat, Lukács imputed the responsibility to the immaturity of the proletarian consciousness. By doing this, he adopted again the opinion of the strongman of the regime: in his last telegram to Lenin, Béla Kun blamed the military collapse and the anti-revolutionary behaviour of the workers for the breakdown of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. He finished his letter with the comforting thought that “every fight for the preservation of the genuine but watery dictatorship would have been in vain.”<sup>4</sup> Kun wanted to find an adequate formulation of the essence of the political system he governed as a people’s commissar: the dictatorship was “genuine” (that is, Bolshevik and not Social Democratic in essence) but “watery” (that is, its spirit diluted in lukewarm Social Democracy).

Lukács who was never tired of criticizing Social Democratic opportunism vented his anger in pure Marxist manner saying that opportunism is nothing else but a way of acting which derives discouraging consequences not from the dialectics but from the actual situation because it “mistakes the actual, psychological state of consciousness of proletarians for the class consciousness of the proletariat” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 74). Hence, Lukács formulated in *History and Class Consciousness* a Jacobin solution: the separation of the *conscience de tous* from the *conscience générale*. However, the general consciousness of the proletariat is not a mere fiction, as its existence is proven by the recent revolutions and their principal institutions, the revolutionary workers’ councils. These last ones were eventually corrupted by Social Democracy, but the dominant idea behind them is clear: forming the class consciousness of the proletariat.

The teaching of the Hungarian Soviet Republic as a historical experiment concerning the concessions made to the Social Democrats was for Lukács that these concessions had undermined the belief in the legality of the dictatorship among the members of the society. Another and worse consequence of these concessions was the failure of the economic transformation:

I have in mind here not only the more or less overt counterrevolutionary sabotage of the process of socialization perpetrated throughout the Hungarian soviet dictatorship by the trade-union bureaucrats with the aim of restoring capitalism as painlessly as possible. I am thinking here also of the widely noted phenomenon of corruption in the soviets which has one of its chief sources here. Partly in the mentality of many soviet officials who were inwardly prepared for the return of a ‘legitimate’ capitalism and who were therefore intent on being able to justify their own actions when it came necessary. (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 268)

As for culture, Lukács regretfully noted that the economic and political class consciousness is generally not accompanied by an adequate cultural class consciousness which often remains nothing but “the self-criticism of capitalism – carried out here by the proletariat” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 79).

Concerning the Brest-Litovsk treaty, the main difference between Lenin and Kun, according to the evaluation Lukács offered in *History and Class Consciousness*, was that Russian Communists negotiated with the Central Powers when other revolutions were still looming on the horizon; Kun, however, had to make his decision of accepting the Entente ultimatum in late June 1919 knowing that the revolutionary wave had stopped: concessive behaviour, therefore, had no sense from the point of view of the world revolution.

Lukács saw the main reason of the temporary victory of the Hungarian revolution in the fact of “a fortunate constellation of circumstances” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 270). He had in mind the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Another passage shows that he assessed the lesson of the Hungarian revolution in Central-European perspective:

From the Great French Revolution on, all revolutions exhibit the same pattern with increasing intensity. When revolution breaks out the absolute monarchy and later the semi-absolute, semi-feudal military monarchies upon which the economic hegemony of the bourgeoisie was based in Central and Eastern Europe, tend ‘all the once’ to lose their hold over society. Social power lies abandoned in the street, without an owner so to speak. A Restoration only becomes possible in the absence of any revolutionary class to take advantage of this ownerless power. (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 308)

Lukács had no doubt at all that the French Revolution and the Hungarian Soviet Republic are two elements of a single process: in his eyes, 1919 was historically as important as any of the great historic events from the collapse of the Roman Empire till the Great War itself. In the foreword of his *Lenin*, Lukács characterized the revolutionary Social Democrat leader at the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs Ottó Korvin as the ascetical type of the revolutionaries, a Robespierre or Saint-Just type. Similarly, its appendix written in 1969 described Lenin’s non-ascetical personality as a *tertium datur* between Danton and Robespierre. According to the Communists, from the perspective of the philosophy of history the Hungarian revolution 1919 has reached its principal objective even if – in opposition to the 1848/49 revolutionary wave in Europe – the Hungarian (and European) public opinion did not share this view.

---

4 Qtd in Borsányi, György. Kun Béla: Politikai életrajz [Béla Kun: A Political Biography]. Budapest: Kossuth, 1979, p. 198.



For Lukács the fact that the Soviet Republic could not build up a wide, sustainable social basis was paramount: “only in the class consciousness of the proletariat do we find that the correct view of revolutionary action is so deeply anchored and so deeply rooted in the instincts that this attitude need only be made conscious, for it to provide a clear lead” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 304). In the consciousness of other classes, “there is nothing, nor can be anything to make their actions lead inevitably towards the proletarian revolution” (LUKÁCS, 1971, p. 304). This claim is compatible with the fact that the *establishment* of the proletarian dictatorship was indeed a result of a wide social discontentment.

*History and Class Consciousness* and *Lenin* complement each other: the subject matter of the former is Marxism as a “total” philosophy of history while that of the latter is Leninism as a revolutionary theory.

Revolution as an idea did not cease to pose a problem for Lukács. His philosopher self rescued the “actuality” of revolution as a presupposition of the possibility of the dialectical method, while his Communist activist self had to learn to live with a movement which was getting increasingly inward-looking and dogmatic, without any real revolutionary perspective.

In opposition to the standpoint of a vulgar (Social Democratic) Marxist who regards the defeated revolutions as “mistakes” and victorious revolutions as temporary achievements, historical materialism is, in Lukács’s view, real Marxism that believes in the actuality of proletarian revolution in world history. The „actuality” of the revolution does not mean its everyday eventuality but the constant consideration of its historical horizon. In harmony with Rosa Luxemburg, he held that from the point of view of the history of philosophy, no revolution can come „too early:” its actuality, in this sense, has nothing to do with the fact that from the point of view of assuming and retaining of power it comes necessarily always too early. Rosa Luxemburg’s thesis, according to Lukács, can be adapted to Hungary as well as to Germany. The problems and questions of the organization were of secondary importance: that is, the fusion of the two workers’ parties in Hungary on 21 March, 1919, and renouncing of the name ‘Communist’ has no significance concerning the essence of the revolution.

As for the diminishing social basis of the revolution, he blamed also in this work of 1924 the hesitating attitude of the Social Democrats. The characterization Lukács gave to the bourgeois and proletarian revolutions in general, clearly mirrors his experiences in Hungary in 1918-1919. According to the “opportunists” (that is, the Social Democrats) the bourgeois revolutions must be supported by the proletariat if they advocate some of the demands of the fourth estate. As a consequence, the proletariat gives up its class aims.

But the Bolsheviks made mistakes, too. They did not recognize that the time was not mature enough for a pure proletarian revolution; they should have respected the agrarian and the national aspects. Lukács found a perspicuous Hegelian formulation to link the proletarian revolution to the bourgeois one:

For the real revolution is the dialectical transformation of the bourgeois revolution into the proletarian revolution. ... [T]he bourgeoisie’s recourse to counter-revolution indicates not only its hostility towards the proletariat, but at the same time the renunciation of its own revolutionary traditions. *It abandons the inheritance of its revolutionary past to the proletariat.* From now on the proletariat is the only class capable of taking the bourgeois revolution to its logical conclusion. ... Thus, the proletarian revolution now means at one and the same time the realization and the suppression of the bourgeois revolution. (LUKÁCS, 1970, pp. 48-9)

That is the reason why the Bolshevik dictatorship enjoyed, at least at the beginning, a more or less wide social support in Hungary. The lesson of the revisiting of the 1918-1919 Hungarian revolutions and *History and Class Consciousness* in its context is, in this aspect, in harmony with Lukács’s opinion that considerable parts of the society wanted to save “the” revolution.

### *Bibliographical References*

- BORSÁNYI, G.; KUN, B. *Politikai életrajz* [Béla Kun: A Political Biography]. Budapest: Kossuth, 1979.
- GÁBOR, G. Hungarian revolutions: *As Revoluções Húngaras*. (Coleção Revoluções do Século XX. Direção de Emília Viotti da Costa). São Paulo: Editora Unesp, 2014.
- KUN, B. “Lenin.” *Válogatott cikkek és beszédek* [Selected Articles and Speeches]. Ed. Éva Moharos. Budapest: Kossuth, 1985.
- LUKÁCS, G. *Forradalomban. Cikkek, tanulmányok 1918-1919.* [In Revolution. Articles, essays 1918-1919.] Eds Miklós Mesterházi and Ferenc L. Lendvai. Budapest: Magvető, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Transl. Rodney Livingstone. London: Merlin Press, 1971.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lenin. A Study on the Unity of His Thought*. Transl. Nicholas Jacobs. London: New Left Books, 1970.

MESTERHÁZI, M. *A messianizmus történetfilozófusa – Lukács György munkássága a húszas években* [A Philosopher of History of Messianism – György Lukács in the 1920s]. Budapest: MTA Filozófiai Intézet – Lukács Archívum, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Lukács's History and Class Consciousness in the Debates of the 1920s*. In: Hungarian Studies on György Lukács. Vol I. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1993.